

THE MYSTERY of the BOULE CABINET

BY BURTON E. STEVENSON

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CHAPTER IX.
The Veiled Lady.

MR. HORNBLLOWER must have driven straight to her family residence on the avenue, or perhaps she was waiting him at his office. At any rate, he called on her inside the half hour.

"My client would like to see the cabinet at once," he said. "She is in a very nervous condition, especially since she learned that some one else has tried to open the drawer. When will it be convenient for you to go with me?"

"I can go at once," I said. "Then we will drive around for you. We should be there in fifteen or twenty minutes."

"Very well," I said. "I'll be ready. I shall, of course, want to take a witness with me."

"That is quite proper," assented Mr. Hornblower. "We can have no objection to that. In twenty minutes, then."

I got the Record office as soon as I could, but Godfrey was not there. He did not come on usually, some one said, until the middle of the afternoon. I rang up his rooms, but there was no reply. Finally I called up the Vantheims.

"Parks," I said. "I am bringing up some people to look at that cabinet. It might be just as well to get that out of the way and have all the lights going."

"The lights are already going, sir," he said.

"Already going? What do you mean?"

"Mr. Godfrey has been here for quite awhile, sir, fooling with that cabinet thing."

"Tell him, Parks, that I am bringing some people up to see the cabinet and that I should like him to stay there and be a witness of the proceedings."

"Very well, sir," assented Parks. "Everything quiet?"

"Oh, yes, sir. There was two policemen outside all night and Rogers and me inside."

"Mr. Hornblower's carriage is below, sir," announced the office boy, opening the door.

"All right," I said. "We are coming right up, Parks. Goodbye," and I hung up and slipped into my coat.

Then as I took down my hat a sudden thought struck me. If the unknown Frenchman was indeed an emissary of Monsieur X, Madame might be acquainted with him. It was a long shot, but worth trying. I stepped to my desk, took out the photograph which Godfrey had given me and slipped it into my pocket. Then I hurried out to the elevator.

There were three persons in the carriage. Mr. Hornblower sat with his back to the horses, and two women were on the opposite seat. Both were dressed in black and heavily veiled, but there was about them the indefinable distinction of mistress and maid. The latter was restless and uneasy.

Mr. Hornblower glanced behind me as I entered.

"He spoke of a witness," he said. "He is at the Vantine house," I explained and sat down beside him.

"This is Mr. Lester," he said, and the veiled lady opposite him, whom I had

known at once to be the mistress, inclined her head a little.

Parks opened the door to us, and nodding to him, I led the way along the hall and into the anteroom. Godfrey was waiting us there, and I saw the flame of interest which leaped into his eyes as Mr. Hornblower and the two veiled women entered.

"This is my witness," I said to the former. "Mr. Godfrey—Mr. Hornblower."

Godfrey bowed, and Hornblower regarded him with a good humored smile.

"If I were not sure of Mr. Godfrey's discretion," he said, "I should object. But I have tested it before this and know that it can be relied upon."

The woman I had decided was the maid sat down as though her legs were unable to sustain her and was nervously clasping and unclasping her hands. Even her mistress showed signs of impatience.

"The cabinet is in here," I said and led the way into the inner room, the two men and the veiled lady at my heels.

It stood in the middle of the floor, just as it had stood since the night of the tragedy, and all the lights were going. As I entered I noticed Godfrey's gauntlet lying on a chair.

"Is it the right one, madam?" I asked.

"Yes," she answered, with a gasp that was almost a sob.

"You are sure?" I queried.

"Do you think I could be mistaken in such a matter, sir? I assure you

"I believe you, madame," I said, and with a sigh of relief that was almost a sob, she rebounded the packet and slipped it into the bosom of her gown.

"There is one thing," I added, "which madame can, perhaps, do for me."

"I shall be most happy," she breathed. "As I have told Mr. Hornblower," I continued, "two men died in this room the day before yesterday, or rather, it was in the room beyond that they died, but we believe it was here they received the wounds which caused death. It seems that we were wrong in this."

"Undoubtedly," she agreed. "There has never been any such weird mechanism as you described connected with that drawer. Mr. Lester—at least not since I have had it. There is a legend, you know, that the cabinet was made for Mme. de Montespan."

"Mr. Vantine suspected as much," I said. "He was examining it at the time he died. What the other man was doing we do not know, but if we could identify him it might help us. It has occurred to me, madame, that you may have seen him on La Touraine—that he may even be known to you."

"What was his name?"

"The card he sent to Mr. Vantine bore the name of Theophile D'Aurelle."

"She shook her head.

"I have never before heard that name, Mr. Lester."

"Perhaps you will recognize this photograph?"

She took it, looked at it and again shook her head. Then she looked at it again, turning aside and raising her veil in order to see it better.

"There seems to be something familiar about the face," she said at last, "as though I might have seen the man somewhere."

"On the boat, perhaps," I suggested, but I knew very well it was not on the boat, since the man had crossed in the stateroom.

"No; it was not on the boat. I did not leave my stateroom on the boat. But I am quite sure that I have seen him, and yet I can't say where. Perhaps my maid can help us." Photograph in hand, she stepped through the doorway into the outer room.

"Julie," said she in rapid French, "I have here the photograph of a man who was killed in this room most mysteriously a few days ago. These gentlemen wish to identify him. The face seems to me somehow familiar, but I cannot place it. Look at it."

Julie put forth a shaking hand, took the photograph and glanced at it; then, with a long sigh, slid limply to the floor before either Godfrey or I could catch her.

As she fell her veil, catching on the chair back, was torn away, and, looking down at her, a great emotion burst within me. For I recognized the mysterious woman whose photograph D'Aurelle had carried in his watch case.

For a moment I stood spellbound, staring down at that faded and passion stained countenance; then Godfrey sprang forward and lifted the unconscious woman to the couch.

"Bring some water," he said, and as he turned and looked at me I saw that his face was glowing with excitement. I rushed to the door and snatched it open. Rogers was standing in the hall outside, and I sent him hurrying for the water and turned back into the room.

Godfrey was chafing the girl's hands, and the veiled lady was bending over her, fumbling at the hooks of her bodice.

"Here's the water, sir," said Rogers and handed me glass and pitcher.

The next instant his eyes fell upon the woman on the couch. He stood

ed. "I must warn you that in touching that cabinet you are running a great risk."

"A great risk?" she echoed, looking at me.

"Is there not connected with the drawer," I asked, "a mechanism which as the drawer is opened plunges two poisoned fangs into the hand which opens it?"

"No, Mr. Lester," she answered, as tonishment in her voice. "I assure you there is no such mechanism."

I clutched at a last straw, and a sorry one it was.

"The mechanism may have been placed there since the cabinet passed from your possession," I suggested.

"That is perhaps possible," she agreed, though I saw that she was unconvinced.

"At any rate, madame," I said, "I would ask that in opening the drawer you wear this gauntlet," and I picked up Godfrey's gauntlet from the chair on which it lay. "It is needless to say you should take any risk, however slight. Permit me," and I slipped the gauntlet over her right hand.

As I did so I glanced at Godfrey. He was staring at the veiled lady with such a look of stupefaction that I nearly choked with delight. It had not often been my luck to see Jim Godfrey mystified, but he was certainly mystified now.

She moved toward the cabinet. Godfrey and I close behind her. Instinctively I glanced toward the shuttered window, but the semicircle of light was unobscured.

The veiled lady bent above the table and disposed of the fingers of her right hand to fit the metal inlay midway of the left side.

"It is a little awkward," she said. "I have always been accustomed to using the left hand. You will notice that I am pressing on three points. But to open the drawer one must press these points in a certain order—first this one, then this one and then this one."

There was a sharp click, and at the side of the table a piece of the metal inlay fell forward.

"That is the handle," said the veiled lady, and without an instant's hesitation, while my heart stood still, she grasped it and drew out a shallow drawer. "Ah!" And, casting aside the ridiculous gauntlet, she caught up the packet of papers which lay within.

"You see that they are only letters, Mr. Lester," she said in a low voice. "and I assure you that they belong to me."

"I believe you, madame," I said, and with a sigh of relief that was almost a sob, she rebounded the packet and slipped it into the bosom of her gown.

"There is one thing," I added, "which madame can, perhaps, do for me."

"I shall be most happy," she breathed. "As I have told Mr. Hornblower," I continued, "two men died in this room the day before yesterday, or rather, it was in the room beyond that they died, but we believe it was here they received the wounds which caused death. It seems that we were wrong in this."

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The next instant his eyes fell upon the woman on the couch. He stood

starting, his face turning slowly purple; then, clutching at his throat, he half turned and fell just as I had seen him do once before. Then Parks appeared.

"Rogers has had another fit. Get the ammonia!" shouted Godfrey. Parks staggered away.

When he came back a moment later with the ammonia he held up Rogers' head, while Parks applied the phial to his nostrils.

Madame, meanwhile, had dashed some water into the face of the unconscious Julie.

"She will soon be all right again," she said, and, truly enough, at the end of a few seconds, the girl opened her eyes and looked dazedly about her. Then a violent trembling seized her.

"What is it, Julie?" asked her mistress, taking her hand. "You knew this man?"

A hoarse sob was the only answer. "You must tell me," went on madame quietly, but firmly. "You knew this man?"

The girl nodded and closed her eyes. "In Paris?"

The girl nodded again. "He was your lover?"

"A third nod, and a flood of tears. "I remember, now," said madame suddenly. "I saw him with her once. What was he doing in this house?" she went on more sternly.

"Madame will never forgive me!" sobbed the girl, and I began to think

enough, sir," he said hoarsely. "She's my wife."

CHAPTER X.
Enter M. Armand.

EIGHT or ten years before the fair Julie—at least she was fairer then than now—had come to New York to enter the employ of a family whose mistress had decided that life without a French maid was unendurable. Rogers had met her, had been fascinated by her black eyes and red lips, had in the end proposed marriage, had been accepted and for some months had led an eventful existence as the husband of the siren. Then one morning he awakened to find her gone.

He had, of course, trusted his savings to her, and the savings were gone also. Julie, it seems, had been overcome with longing for the Paris asphalt, and she had flown back to France. Rogers had thought of following; but, appalled at the difficulty of finding her in Paris, not knowing what he should do if he did find her, he had finally given up and had settled gloomily down to live upon his memories. Some sort of affection for her had kept alive within him, and when he opened the door of Vantine's house and found her standing on the steps he was as wax in her hands.

When the story was finished Julie was quite herself again, even a little proud, I think, of holding the center of the stage in the role of siren.

"This is all true, I suppose?" asked the veiled lady.

"All quite true, madame," answered Julie, with a shrug. "I am older now and have more sense; besides, I am no longer sought after as I was."

"And so," said madame, with irony. "You are now no doubt willing to return to your husband?"

"I have been considering it, madame. One must have a harbor in one's old age."

I glanced at Rogers and was astonished to see that he was regarding the woman with affectionate admiration.

"I have hesitated," she added, "only because of madame. Where would madame get another maid such as I?"

"We will discuss it," said the veiled lady, "when we are alone. And now, perhaps, you will be so good as to tell us of your previous visit here."

"One day on the boat as I was looking down at the passengers of the third class that I perceived Georges—M. Drouet—strolling about. I was boulevardier—what you call upset with amazement, and then he looked up and our eyes met, and he came beneath me and commanded that I meet him that evening. It was then that I learned his plan. It was to secure those letters for himself and to dispose of them."

"To whom?" asked Godfrey.

"To the person that would pay the greatest price for them, most certainly. They were to be offered first to madame at 10,000 francs each. Should she refuse they were then to be offered to M. le Duc—he would surely desire to possess them."

The veiled lady shivered a little.

"That night," continued Julie, "I decided that at the first moment I would hasten to this house; I would explain the matter to M. Vantine; I would persuade him to restore to me the letters with which I would try to madame. I knew also that I could rely upon her gratitude."

"It was not until evening that I found an opportunity to leave madame. I hastened here; I rang the bell, but I confess I should have failed. I should not have secured an entrance if it had not been that it was my husband who opened the door to me. M. Vantine himself came into the hall, and I ran to him and begged that he hear me. It was then that he invited me to enter this room."

She paused again, and a little shiver of expectancy ran through me. At last we were to learn how Philip Vantine had met his death.

"I sat down," continued Julie, "I told him the story from the very beginning. He listened with much interest, but when I proposed that he should restore to me the letters he hesitated. He walked up and down the room, trying to decide, then he took me through that door into the room beyond. The cabinet was standing in the center of the floor, and all the lights were blazing."

"I went to the cabinet and pressed on the three springs, as I had seen madame do. The little handle at the side fell out, but suddenly he stopped me."

"Those letters do not belong to you," he said. "They belong to your mistress. I cannot permit that you take them away, for after all, I do not know you. You may intend to make some bad use of them."

"He brought me back into this room. I could have cried with rage."

"Return to your mistress," he said, "and inform her that I shall be most happy to return the letters to her. But it must be in her own hands that I place them."

"I saw that it was of no use to argue further. He was adamant. So I left the house, he himself opening the door for me. And that is all that I know, madame."

"Of course," Godfrey suggested gently, "as soon as you reached home you related to your mistress what had occurred?"

Julie gave a little crimson.

"No, monsieur," she said, "I told her nothing. I feared that without the letters she would misunderstand my motives."

"And then, of course, without the letters, there would be no reward," Godfrey supplemented.

The veiled lady rose. Julie resumed her veil, looking at Godfrey a glance anything but friendly. The veiled lady turned to me and held out her hand. "I thank you, Mr. Lester, for your kindness," she said. "Come, Julie," and she moved toward the door, which Rogers hastened to open.

Mr. Hornblower nodded and passed out after them, and Godfrey and I were left alone together.

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